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Unauthorized Aliens in the United States: Estimates Since 1986

Ruth Ellen Wasem
Specialist in Immigration Policy
Domestic Social Policy Division

Summary

Estimates derived from the March Supplement of the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey indicate that the unauthorized resident alien population (commonly referred to as illegal aliens) has risen from 3.2 million in 1986 to 11.1 million in 2005. Almost 40%, an estimated 4.4 million have arrived in the past five years. Research suggests that a constellation of factors has contributed to the increase in unauthorized resident aliens, including the "push-pull" of a prosperous economy, the inadvertent consequence of border enforcement policies that may have curbed the fluid movement of migrant workers, and the backlogs in processing immigrant petitions. Some maintain that inadequate resources for enforcement of immigration laws at the border and in the interior of the country are also factors. This report does not track legislation and will be updated as needed.

Background

An estimated 35.7 million foreign-born people resided in the United States in 2005. In recent years, the United States typically admits or adjusts 600,000 to 1 million aliens annually, giving them the status of "legal permanent resident" (LPR). In addition to those foreign nationals who permanently reside legally in the United States, millions each year come temporarily on nonimmigrant visas, and some of these nonimmigrants (e.g., foreign students and intra-company business transfers) may reside legally in the United States for several years. It is also estimated that each year hundreds of thousands of foreign nationals overstay their nonimmigrant visas or enter the country illegally (with fraudulent documents or bypassing immigration inspections) and thus are unauthorized aliens.

The last major law that allowed unauthorized aliens living in the United States to legalize their status was the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 (P.L. 99-603). Generally, legislation such as IRCA is referred to as an "amnesty" or a legalization program because it provides LPR status to aliens who are otherwise residing illegally in the United States. IRCA included a time-limited legalization program, codified at § 245A of the Immigration and Nationality Act, that enabled certain illegal aliens who entered the United States before January 1, 1982, to become LPRs. It also had

a provision that permitted aliens working illegally as “special agricultural workers” to become LPRs.¹ Nearly 2.7 million aliens established legal status through IRCA.

Continued high levels of unauthorized migration to the United States have, in part, prompted the current discussion of guest worker programs, and several major legislative proposals include provisions that would permit legalization under specified conditions. There are also legislative proposals aimed at reducing unauthorized migration by tightening up enforcement of immigration laws.² The report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (also known as the 9/11 Commission) stated that “... more than 9 million people are in the United States outside the legal immigration system” as one of the reasons the Commission recommended improving immigration services and strengthening enforcement of immigration laws.³

This report presents data estimating the number of unauthorized aliens who have been living in the United States since 1986. There have been a variety of estimates of the unauthorized resident alien population over this period, sometimes with substantially different results. This report is limited to data analyses of the Current Population Survey (CPS) conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics so that there is a basic standard of comparison over time.⁴

Estimates Since 1986

For a basis of comparison, **Figure 1** presents the estimate of 3.2 million unauthorized resident aliens in 1986 calculated by demographers Karen Woodrow and Jeffrey Passel, who worked for the U.S. Census Bureau at that time. As expected after the passage of

¹ 8 U.S.C. § 1255a; and 8 U.S.C. § 1160.

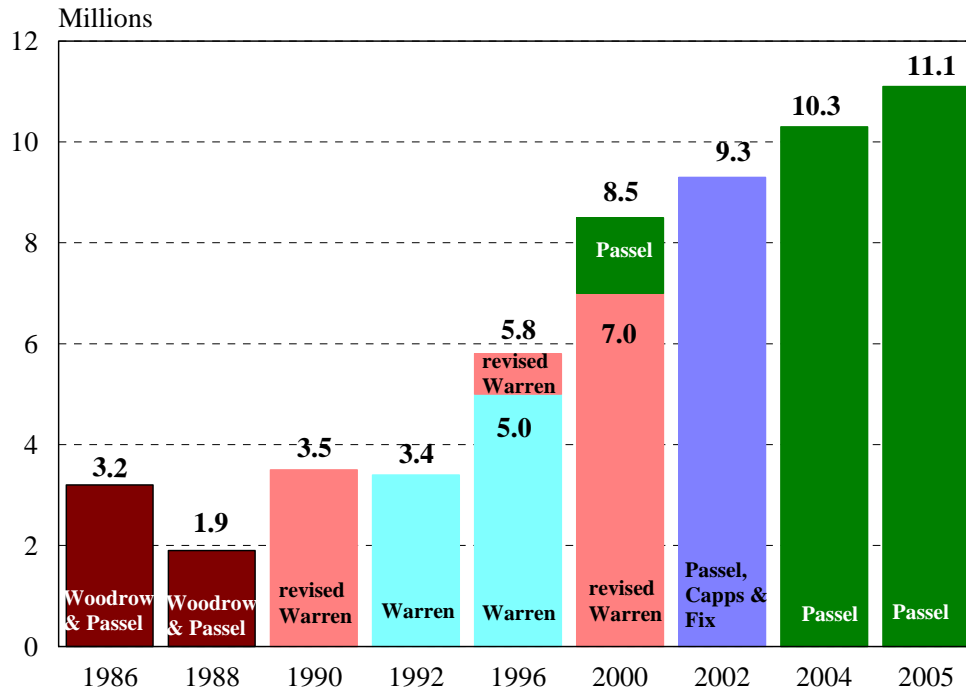
² CRS Report RL32044, *Immigration: Policy Considerations Related to Guest Worker Programs*, by Andorra Bruno; CRS Report RL33125, *Immigration Legislation and Issues in the 109th Congress*, coordinated by Andorra Bruno; and CRS Report RL33351, *Immigration Enforcement Within the United States*, coordinated by Alison Siskin.

³ For a discussion of these recommendations, see National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, chap. 12.4, pp. 383-391, July 2004.

⁴ The demographers who conducted these analyses all used some variant of a residual methodology to estimate the population (i.e., the estimated population remaining after citizens and authorized aliens are accounted for), another reason they were selected for this comparison. Demographers at the U.S. Census Bureau also have used a similar methodology to estimate the residual foreign born population in the 2000 decennial census, and they reported the following. “According to our calculations, the estimated residual foreign-born population counted in the 2000 census was 8,705,419. Assuming a 15% undercount rate yields a population of 10,241,669 in 2000.” They point out that the category of residual foreign born includes “quasi legal aliens” (i.e., aliens without legal status who have petitions pending or court cases underway that potentially would give them LPR status) as well as unauthorized aliens and thus should not be considered an official estimate of unauthorized resident aliens. U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division Working Paper 61, *Evaluating Components of International Migration: The Residual Foreign Born*, by Joseph M. Costanzo, Cynthia Davis, Caribert Irazi, Daniel Goodkind, and Roberto Ramirez, June 2002.

IRCA, the estimate for 1988 dropped to 1.9 million.⁵ According to demographer Robert Warren of the former Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), the estimated unauthorized resident alien population grew to 3.4 million in 1992 and to 5.0 million in 1996.⁶ By the close of the decade, the estimated number of unauthorized alien residents had more than doubled. Passel, now at the Pew Hispanic Center, estimated the unauthorized population in 2000 at 8.5 million, but this latter estimate included aliens who had petitions pending or relief from deportation.⁷

Figure 1. Estimates of the Unauthorized Resident Alien Population, 1986-2005



Source: CRS presentation of analysis of Current Population Survey data conducted by Karen Woodrow and Jeffrey Passel (1986 and 1990), Robert Warren (1996, 2000, and 2003), Jeffrey Passel, Randy Capps and Michael Fix (2002), and Passel (2000, 2005 and 2006).

Subsequently, Warren estimated that there were 7.0 million unauthorized aliens residing in the United States in 2000. As depicted in **Figure 1**, he also revised his earlier analyses using the latest CPS and estimated that there were 3.5 million unauthorized aliens living in the United States in 1990 and 5.8 million in 1996. Warren excluded “quasi-legal” aliens (e.g., those who had petitions pending or relief from deportation)

⁵ Karen Woodrow and Jeffrey Passel, “Post-IRCA Undocumented Immigration to the United States: An Analysis Based on the June 1988 CPS,” in *Undocumented Migration to the United States*, by Frank D. Bean, Barry Edmonston and Jeffrey Passel (RAND Corporation, 1990).

⁶ *Annual Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States and Components of Change: 1987 to 1997*, by Robert Warren, Office of Policy and Planning, U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, Sept. 2000.

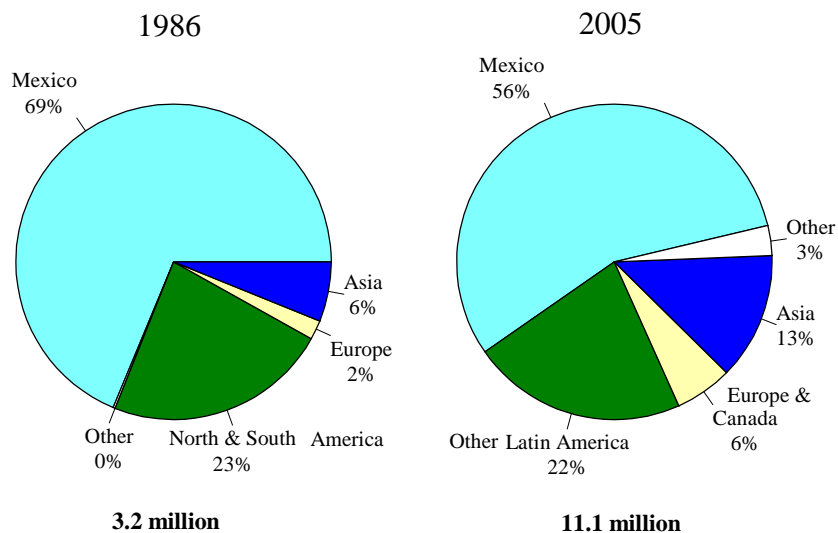
⁷ U.S. Congress, House Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Immigration and Claims, *Hearing on the U.S. Population and Immigration*, Aug. 2, 2001.

from his estimates.⁸ By 2002, the estimated number of unauthorized resident aliens had risen to 9.3 million.⁹ The net growth in unauthorized aliens had averaged about 500,000 annually. If this trend holds, about 12 million unauthorized aliens may be residing in the United States today.

Unauthorized Alien Residents in 2005

The most recent published estimate based upon the CPS is that 11.1 million unauthorized aliens were residing in the United States in 2005.¹⁰ According to this analysis by Passel, Mexicans make up over half of undocumented immigrants — 56 % of the total, or about 6.2 million. He estimates that 2.5 million (22%) are from other Latin American countries. About 1.5 million are from Asia, 0.6 million from Europe and Canada, and 0.4 million from the rest of the world.

Figure 2. Unauthorized Resident Aliens by Region, 1986 and 2005



Source: CRS presentation of analysis of Current Population Survey data conducted by Karen Woodrow and Jeffrey Passel (1990), and Jeffrey Passel (2006).

As **Figure 2** illustrates, the 2005 distribution by region of origin is similar to Woodrow and Passel's analysis of the 1986 data, despite the growth in overall numbers. In 1986, 69% of the unauthorized aliens residing in the United States were estimated to

⁸ U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, *Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States, 1990 to 2000*, Jan. 31, 2003.

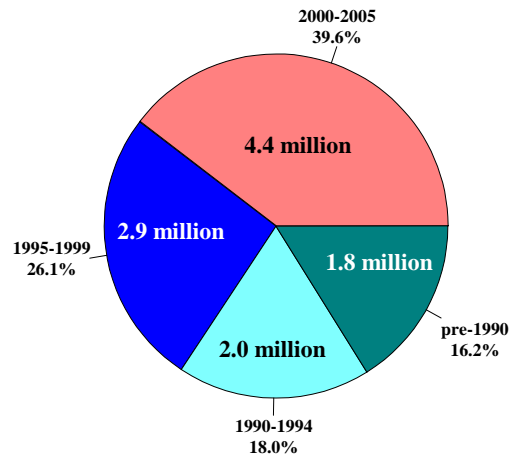
⁹ The Urban Institute, *Undocumented Immigrants: Facts and Figures*, by Jeffrey Passel, Randy Capps, and Michael Fix, Jan. 12, 2004.

¹⁰ Pew Hispanic Center, *The Size and Characteristics of the Unauthorized Migrant Population in the U.S.: Estimates Based on the March 2005 Current Population Survey*, by Jeffrey S. Passel, Mar. 2006, available at [<http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/61.pdf>].

be from Mexico compared to 56% in 2005. Asia's share of the unauthorized alien residents appears to have grown over this period (from 6% to 13%).¹¹

Almost two-thirds of unauthorized alien residents have arrived to the United States in the past decade. As **Figure 3** shows, an estimated 4.4 million migrated in 2000 or later. Only 1.8 million unauthorized aliens have been residing in the United States prior to 1990.

Figure 3. Unauthorized Alien Residents by Period of Arrival, 2005



Source: CRS presentation of analysis of Current Population Survey data conducted by Jeffrey Passel (2006).

Passel estimates that four states had over half a million unauthorized residents in 2005: California (2.5-2.8 million), Texas (1.4-1.6 million), Florida (0.8-1.0 million), and New York (0.6-0.7 million). The following states, according to Passel, had about 300,000 to 450,000 unauthorized alien residents: Arizona, Illinois, Georgia, New Jersey, and North Carolina.¹²

Contributing Factors

The research points to a constellation of factors that have contributed to the increase in unauthorized resident aliens. Historically, unauthorized migration is generally attributed to the “push-pull” of prosperity-fueled job opportunities in the United States in contrast to limited or nonexistent job opportunities in the sending countries.¹³ Some observers maintain that lax enforcement of employer sanctions for hiring unauthorized aliens has facilitated this “push-pull,” but it is difficult to empirically demonstrate this element. Political instability or civil unrest at home is another element that traditionally has induced people to risk unauthorized migration, but the motives for such migrations are sometimes mixed with the economic hardships that are often correlated with political upheaval.¹⁴

¹¹ Note that Canada is grouped with North and South America (excluding Mexico) in 1986 and with Europe in 2005.

¹² Pew Hispanic Center, *Estimates of the Unauthorized Migrant Population for States based on the March 2005 CPS*, by Jeffrey S. Passel, Mar. 2006.

¹³ CRS Report RL32044, *Immigration: Policy Considerations Related to Guest Worker Programs*, by Andorra Bruno, pp. 6-7; and CRS Report RL32562, *Border Security: The Role of the U.S. Border Patrol*, by Blas Nuñez-Neto.

¹⁴ For a summary of this research, see Commission for the Study of International Migration and Cooperative Economic Development, *Unauthorized Migration: An Economic Development Response*, Appendix E, July 1990.

Although most policy makers assume that tighter border enforcement reduces unauthorized migration, some researchers are now suggesting that the strengthening of the immigration enforcement provisions, most notably by the enactment of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA), may have inadvertently *increased* unauthorized resident aliens. This perspective argues that IIRIRA's increased penalties for illegal entry coupled with increased resources for border enforcement stymied what had been a rather fluid movement of migratory workers along the southern border; this in turn raised the stakes in crossing the border illegally and made it more likely that those who succeed in entering the United States will stay.¹⁵

Another contributing factor — best represented by the “quasi-legal” aliens discussed above — is the wait-times for immigrant petitions to be processed and visas to become available to legally come to the United States. There are statutory ceilings that limit the number of immigrant visas issued each year. There are also significant backlogs in processing petitions due to the high volume of aliens eligible to immigrate to the United States and the large number eligible to become U.S. citizens.¹⁶ Many observe that these family members sometimes risk residing without legal status with their family in the United States while they wait for the petitions and visas to be processed. Anecdotal reports suggest some unauthorized family members forego petitioning for LPR status out of fear of deportation if they come forward.

Some observers point to shifts in immigration enforcement priorities away from illegal entry to removing suspected terrorists and criminal aliens when they assess the increase of unauthorized resident aliens. They argue that border security measures enacted in recent years have not received adequate funding to be effective against illegal migration. Additionally, some maintain that there has not been sufficient funding and staffing for the enforcement of immigration laws in the interior of the country, most notably for investigations of worksite violations and document fraud. Some argue that state and local law enforcement officers should be more involved in apprehending illegal aliens. Some would make illegal presence an aggravated felony.¹⁷

More elusive factors — such as media reports of possible “amnesty” legislation and perceptions that it is more difficult to obtain temporary visas — are cited by some as possible “magnets” for illegal migration. It is difficult to measure whether, or to what extent, these phenomena have contributed to the increase in unauthorized resident aliens.

¹⁵ For analysis of the IIRIRA's effect on unauthorized alien residents, see Wayne Cornelius, “Death at the Border: Efficacy and Unintended Consequences of U.S. Immigration Control Policy,” *Population and Development Review*, vol. 27, no.4 (Dec. 2001). For an analysis of the reduction in unauthorized alien apprehensions after IRCA, see Thomas J. Espenshade, “Undocumented Migration to the United States: Evidence from a Repeated Trials Model,” in *Undocumented Migration to the United States*, by Frank D. Bean, Barry Edmonston and Jeffrey Passel (RAND Corporation, 1990).

¹⁶ CRS Report RL32235, *U.S. Immigration Policy on Permanent Admissions*, by Ruth Ellen Wasem.

¹⁷ CRS Report RL33351, *Immigration Enforcement Within the United States*, coordinated by Alison Siskin; CRS Report RL33125, *Immigration Legislation and Issues in the 109th Congress*, coordinated by Andorra Bruno; and CRS Report RL33181, *Immigration Related Border Security Legislation in the 109th Congress*, by Blas Nuñez-Neto.